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THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER X.

Muriel, having herself made the declaration of their mutual love, which she had made her lover promise he would keep secret, lost no time in despatching Janey with a message. It was short, but wondrously eloquent.

"Tell him, Janey," she said with a sad little smile, "that I have been very wicked and have ruined us both, and that I do not deserve that he should keep his promise."

Janey started with the message, but the farmer was one too many for them. He caught her at the gate, and without beating about the bush went straight to the point.

"You're going with a message to Mr. Leigh, my lass," he said sternly. "I don't want to know what it is, and I don't care; but if you pass that garden gate, you'll never come through it again while I'm master of Rubywood. Now go back to your mistress and tell her she hasn't a fool for a father."

Quite unconscious of the scene that had taken place between the farmer and his daughter, Wynter Leigh, with Muriel's face ever before his wistful eyes, got through his reaping, paid the engine fee and started on his night's round of inspection, which, as he never so weary, he never neglected.

As he passed the window which he knew was Muriel's, he raised his hand to his lips and murmured a blessing on his love, and then, fired by her nearness, resolved inwardly that, by hook or by crook, he would see her on the morrow and be released from his promise.

Alas! that morrow! When he awoke at sunrise and had eaten his frugal breakfast, he strode down to look at his cows.

His man, Anderson—a quiet, almost sullen-tempered fellow— was standing looking at a beast that stood leaning against the stall as if it were lame.

"What's the matter, Anderson?" asked Leigh.

"Nothing," replied the man. "She's knocked her leg against the stall."

Leigh was on his knees in a moment.

"Turn her round," he said in his short way.

The man obeyed, and the cow, in a weak, shambling way, turned round.

"Knocked her leg?" repeated Leigh doubtfully.

"Yes," said the man. "I saw her do it."

That settled it, of course; and Leigh, telling him to bathe it with cold water, strode off.

In an hour or two he returned, and, walking by the meadow way, was surprised and startled to see another cow limping weakly across the grass.

He went up to it, and looked at it. It was running at the mouth, and seemed lame. He called the man who was at work in a distant part of the field, and pointed out the marks of distress.

"Ah!" said the fellow. "Staggers!"

"Not it," said Leigh, curtly. "I know staggers when I see them, my man. This is not staggers nor anything I've seen before. Fetch the vet."

"He's away at Hopwood," said the man gruffly; "and we don't want him. I'll take her home and doctor her."

Leigh hesitated, but the man, who had been used to cows from boyhood, looked and spoke so confidently that he fell back and allowed him to drive the cow home.

A step behind him, and the postboy rode up. Leigh opened the letter which proved to be one from his uncle, and was as stern in form and manner as the uncle himself:

"Dear Wynter,—A call of business unexpected but urgent, may necessitate my requesting the return of the three thousand pounds which I lent you. I trust you will be prepared should I do so, and I write this early that you may not be inconvenienced.

"I am your faithfully,
ARTHUR LEIGH."

Wynter Leigh's face fell, and he took off his hat.

"A borrower is a slave," he muttered. "What am I to do? He will have the money, if he needs it, though it were carved from my skin. I know him. Oh, Muriel, Muriel, fate is erecting a fresh mountain between you and me for every old one I pull down!"

Musing thus sadly, he came across the farmer. He raised his hat with his earnest, kindly smile, but the old man stared him grimly in the face, and trudged on without the slightest sign of recognition.

Leigh smiled almost as grimly, and quickened his pace.

"One heart is as good as another," he murmured, "and your is as well able to bear a shock as mine. I'll wait no longer, or both my darlings and mine will be broken."

He turned the corner and saw old William running towards him as fast as he could, with fear, distress, and agitation plainly portrayed on his countenance.

"Oh, Maester Leigh, Maester Leigh, the plague be upon us! Heaven is visiting us!"

"What is the matter?" asked Leigh.

"Come to the yard, Maester Leigh, come to the yard!" said the old man; and, as Leigh hurried on, he followed after.

In the yard all was confusion. A crowd was collected round a group of cows, twenty in number, who were lying as if stricken with death.

Leigh forced his way through the outer edge and grasped the veterinary surgeon's arm.

"What ails them?" he said in a low, deep voice.

Mr. Muddock rose from his knees, on which he had been examining a cow's head, and scratched his own.

"I'm blest if I know, sir!" he replied, his face full of bewilderment and concern. "I can't make out none o' the symptoms. It's this 'ere lameness that puzzles me. I've give 'em draughts, and I've bled some on 'em but it's all no use. Look there! By the heavens above, there's one dead!" And he sprang to one beast that, with piteous bellowing, fell over as dead as a stone.

Leigh stood and glanced round, stupified and benumbed. But only for the moment; the next, he turned to one of the men, and in an unnaturally calm voice, said:

"Saddle the mare and ride to Woodenhead. Bring Mr. Williams, the surgeon, here without the loss of a moment. Don't spare the horse."

As he spoke two more cows were brought in, and the veternarian turned with a confused, helpless air to examine them.

In half an hour Mr. Williams galloped into the yard. He shook hands hurriedly with Wynter, and was on his knees beside the cow last seized.

Leigh watched his face intently, and groaned as he turned it up full of dark meaning.

"Speak out, man," said Leigh; "I'm not a child."

"Mr. Leigh," said the surgeon, "they're down with this new disease, the cattle plague. Its highly infectious, and— and— 'pon my soul I'm afraid you'll lose them. Get all the men and have these stricken ones removed; they taint the very air they breathe. Look there! By Heaven there are five more!" and as he spoke he pointed to a small crowd driving a fresh batch of victims.

Leigh threw off his coat and worked like a slave. The men, cheered and encouraged by his example, toiled away in the hot sun and separated the stricken cattle from those not yet attacked.

Then, when the yard was clear save the pile of faggots which the surgeon had ordered to be burned as disinfectants, Leigh stood with folded arms to contemplate his approaching ruin.

His eyes turned towards Rubywood, his heart sank within him, and with a groan he hid his face in his hands.

That night he passed amongst the dead and dying cattle, listening with mumbled ears to the gossip of his men, which ran upon the hideous disease which had just been introduced into England, and by which their master's cows had been destroyed.

In the morning, as if to put the finishing stroke to his misfortune, came a second letter from the North. Terribly abrupt, it was a sentence of ruin without compromise:

"Dear Wynter,—I wrote to you a week ago informing you that in all probability I should require the repayment of the three thousand pounds. Having received no reply, I forward this to remind you that I hold your note agreeing to pay on demand, and to intimate that as my want of the money is urgent, my agent will call upon you to-morrow to receive payment or take the necessary steps to enforce the bond.

I am yours.
"ARTHUR LEIGHT."

With the note in his hand, Leigh sank into a chair, staring straight before him like one demented.

A week ago! Yes, on referring to the first letter he saw that his precise uncle had made no mistake; the letter bore the date of a week back and had evidently been mislaid. To-morrow the agent — one who could not accept any compromise, and who would invariably carry out his instructions to the letter, and would enforce the bond—would be on the scene.

Where could he look for help? Nowhere—he had no friend. No one save old Will, sitting in the sunshine bowed down by the shock of his young master's misfortunes.

No friend! Ah, yes! one, and he knew in his heart that, come what would, she, his beautiful, gentle-hearted Muriel, would be true to him and that, though the years of separation might be long and bitter, she was his to all eternity.

He threw the letter aside, and drawing paper and ink toward him in his firm hand, which no amount of distress could rob of its steadiness, wrote as his heart dictated:

(To be continued.)

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She was provided with a line rope and climbing irons, but she dispensed with the line and went to the top with only two rests. When she reached the scaffolding at the top she had to climb over a projecting rim, which is girdled by a narrow plank footway, and stand on a single 11-inch plank. She remained at the top of the chimney for about a quarter of an hour, talking with the steeplejacks.

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